

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 4, Episode 2: The Damaging Myth of the Natural Teacher: The Story Behind The Story with Beth McMurtrie

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

[00:00:00] **Catherine Ross:** Hello, and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the Center's Executive Director. Let's get started.

[00:00:21] I'm speaking today with Beth McMurtrie, a senior writer for the Chronicle of Higher Education and the author of a recent article, *The Damaging Myth of the Natural Teacher*.

[00:00:34] As a quick reminder for our listeners, in this podcast series, we are exploring dead ideas in teaching and learning. In other words, ideas that are widely believed though not true, and that drive many systems and behaviors in connection to teaching, exercising what Diane Pike called, "the tyranny of dead ideas."

[00:00:56] Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer for the Chronicle of Higher Education, where she writes about the future of learning and technology's influence on teaching. In addition to her reported stories, she also helps write the weekly teaching newsletter about what works in and around the classroom. And just as a fun note, she completed her masters in journalism at Columbia University. So, Beth, very happy to have you here.

[00:01:25] **Beth McMurtrie:** Thank you so much. I'm really happy to be here.

[00:01:28] **Catherine Ross:** So, let me set the stage a little bit. On October 20th, 2021, the Chronicle published this article, *The Damaging Myth of the Natural Teacher*. In this article, Beth tells the story of how various instructors realized that teaching is a set of skills and knowledge that can be learned, as contrasted with the popular idea that teaching is art, that some people are naturally good at it while others are not. And Beth, you also approached this topic through a systems perspective by examining what this means for how teaching is and can be evaluated, how institutions value teaching.

[00:02:16] And so between this dead idea of the natural teacher and the way you thought fully integrated the systemic approaches on thinking about teaching from start to finish, I just couldn't wait to talk with you about it. So let's get started.

[00:02:34] I'm really interested in learning more about how you as a reporter found this story. And maybe first, if you could just share an overview with our listeners, just in case someone hasn't read it, and then I'll follow up with a couple other questions as you talk.

[00:02:54] **Beth McMurtrie:** Sure. Thanks, Catherine. So my story is about how academia tends to view teaching as an innate talent, rather than a skill that can be learned. And I explore why this is and why that's damaging to professors and students and to colleges in general. This myth holds that a great teacher is somebody who is brilliant, or charismatic, or empathetic, or passionate. And, you know, these are all very personal traits, right? So the implication is that either you have it or you

don't, but the truth is it becoming a good teacher is hard work. It takes time. It takes reflection. It takes training often and it takes coaching. So it is actually a skill that can be learned and refined.

[00:03:37] And this is where the problem is. All colleges and universities say that they're committed to good teaching. Yet, if you look across the landscape, and I'm generalizing here, I think we'll be generalizing a lot in this conversation, but you don't see a lot of ways in which colleges demonstrate their commitment in a coherent sort of way.

[00:03:56] So for example, teacher training isn't really built into graduate school and to PhD programs in any meaningful way. It's not really built into new faculty orientation. Professional development is often scattershot and it's usually up to the faculty member to seek it out if they feel like they have a problem in the classroom or want to learn new techniques. And then of course, promotion and tenure policies don't really reward that extra effort it takes to improve your teaching. So one of the things I try to do in this story is look at how we got here through different lenses. Like cultural lens, structural lenses, economic. The structural ones. I touched on those a little bit.

[00:04:38] So doctoral programs tend to emphasize research, even though today, most faculty members don't end up on the tenure track at research intensive institutions. So there's a mismatch there. And then when you're hired into your first job, it's sort of assumed that because you're a content expert, you know how to teach. And yet a lot of new faculty members are given some of the hardest classes to teach, they teach the large introductory courses with maybe 200 students that are very content heavy. Or they teach the general education courses where maybe half the students don't even want to be there. And so there's an attention problem.

[00:05:15] And then teaching evaluations, and we can get a little bit more into this, they're often superficial in the sense that they might center around student course evaluations, which really don't reflect the hard work that goes on behind the scenes when somebody tries to improve their teaching.

[00:05:31] I think the cultural issues are also really interesting too. A lot of professors I talk to, and maybe you've heard this as well, they teach as they were taught. So even a generation ago, up to today, a lot of teaching is done lecture-style, you know, with high stakes testing, particularly still in STEM classes. The professors is the authority at the front of the room and there's this real weed-out mentality towards your students.

[00:05:56] Teaching focused faculty members are often given lower status and pay than those who also do research. Research on teaching isn't as valued as other forms of research, I've been told. And, to me, one of the most interesting cultural issues is that people don't like to talk about their teaching challenges. I think the pandemic has started to change that a little bit. I did a lot of reporting during the pivot to online learning in the early part of the pandemic, and so many faculty members said to me, this was the first time I talked to my colleagues, even in my own department about, what is it that I want students to know? How do I know that they're learning? How do I keep them engaged? And they found those conversations surprisingly refreshing.

[00:06:39] So, again, my story tries to look at all of these things to get a sense of, how did we end up here with the result that we have? This myth of the natural teacher continues to persist and continues to potentially cause some harm in higher education.

[00:06:56] **Catherine Ross:** Wow. That's, that's such a good summary, and you raised so many issues. You sound like you work in a center for teaching and learning, I have to say! But a couple of things came to mind. I've long pointed out that legacy is a part of this problem, because legacy is what creates this culture, as you've identified. I think the culture is much harder to change than anything else. Systems can be changed, might take awhile, but they can be changed. But culture is much, much harder, and it's so hidden from people because this is normal to them, right? It's like you said, this is how they were taught.

[00:07:40] **Beth McMurtrie:** Yeah.

[00:07:41] **Catherine Ross:** So they don't go in feeling like there's anything wrong, except perhaps with the students, who aren't as prepared as they used to be - the cliches! And that was sort of Diane Pike's original inspiration for this notion of dead ideas. And, you know, teaching's always been what's happened behind closed doors. So this notion of people not talking to each other, because one's a lecturer and one's a tenured faculty member and they rarely intersect in their daily lives. And sometimes it's because people are afraid. They don't want their peers to know what they're doing, or judge what they're doing. Right?

[00:08:19] **Beth McMurtrie:** It's really fascinating, yeah. So many people pointed out the contrast with research. I mean, faculty members feel very comfortable talking about their research, and maybe even their research failures with their peers. It might even be a badge of honor that they tried something and it didn't work out and they're going to try again. Research is peer review, and yet when it comes to teaching, it is this kind of private and personal thing. In this story, I quoted Jonathan Zimmermann's book *amateur hour*, where he's looking at the history of college teaching. And it's all about that. It goes back to that original idea that good teaching is an innate trait. Right?

[00:08:55] And then, so if you're not a good teacher, or you're an average teacher, or maybe you just know that you're not quite meeting the mark that you set for yourself, you internalize it rather than saying, hmm. How can I break this down and figure out what's gone wrong in my classroom?

[00:09:10] **Catherine Ross:** Right. Right. It's like a personal deficiency or something if, if it's supposed to be natural. Right. But since this is so rarely talked about, how did you uncover it as a topic?

[00:09:23] **Beth McMurtrie:** Well, it's interesting, you know, I write about teaching for the Chronicle, as you noted. So I've been doing that for about five years, which means I've talked to a lot of people who are teaching experts. People like you, people who run teaching and learning centers, people who've done research on teaching. People who have written books about how to become a better teacher. So I think in those circles, this is talked about maybe they don't use "the myth of the natural teacher" phrase, but when I speak to people about the work of teaching centers, they often say that they feel like their focus group is the coalition of the willing, right? That small percentage of faculty members who were eager to try something new, who can't wait to take the next workshop, who are willing to stick their neck out and experiment with something in their classroom. And that's great, but it's almost like a fixed percentage of people on campus.

[00:10:09] The rest of the faculty, if they come in, sometimes they're coming in because they got bad course evaluations, so they feel like they're being sent to the principal's office. Or they simply are disinterested in whatever workshop might be out there because maybe they have these preconceived notions in their head. So, like I said, I do think it's talked about within certain circles,

it's just not talked about widely, because again, I think a lot of faculty members don't really widely talk about their teaching in general.

[00:10:36] **Catherine Ross:** Right. Which I think is something I can say might have changed a little bit in the pandemic. People started to talk to each other because they had to, because everyone had to figure it out very quickly. I'm hoping we can seize that opening and keep it going.

[00:10:56] **Beth McMurtrie:** And I've heard that a lot from heads of faculty development centers, that they're hoping that the interest in teaching is sustained. You know, people continue to sign up for workshops on rethinking their teaching, on syllabus design, on creating an inclusive classroom. But they also know that there are these competing pressures, right? Once you're back on campus, oh my gosh, I have to catch up on all the research or service I didn't do. Or frankly, everybody is so tired. Right? And so sick of workshops and training, and so then there's that push towards inertia because people have just run out of energy.

[00:11:29] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. That's my fear, people just have so much bandwidth for learning new stuff, with everything we've gone through. And the cognitive and emotional loads are still significant. So, I want to move into the systems approach question I had for you, because I really appreciated the ways you followed the thread of the consequences from this belief in this myth, because that often doesn't get connected and I loved, loved, loved that you pulled that through, that thread through.

[00:12:05] So when people don't think of teaching as a skill to be learned, there's often no consensus on what good teaching is, which means how teaching is evaluated can be very flawed, at best, and often just relies on the student ratings, which is a disincentive for faculty to do anything innovative in their teaching. So it becomes this kind of vicious circle.

[00:12:31] Curious, you know, you provided a lot of really good resources about universities that are changing how they evaluate teaching, and I'm just wondering if you could just say a little bit about anything you learned or what surprised you as you unpacked all of these stories and then these ideas around the systems that, um, keep, that work against, really work against, changing how people view teaching.

[00:12:59] **Beth McMurtrie:** Sure. So I learned about a lot of really interesting projects, as you noted, so it's not as if I was unearthing a problem that people don't know exists. They've been trying to fix things like tenure promotion policies because they understand that, say, just relying on a student course evaluations does not encourage faculty members to spend more time on professional development.

[00:13:20] So some of the initiatives I learned about were various projects focused on trying to create more in depth ways of evaluating teaching through rubrics and benchmarks that breakdown what goes into good teaching. So you're not asking, are you a good teacher, right? Which is essentially what I think student course evaluations break down into. It's asking things like, is your syllabus clear? Do your course goals make sense? How do you use class time? What's the class climate like? Are you learning from what you did in the past and changing what or how you teach? Are you involved in the broader teaching community through things like faculty learning communities or going to workshops, or even doing research on your own teaching?

[00:13:59] And the idea here, teaching experts tell me, is that when you put all these components together they usually add up to something, right? It goes to this idea that teaching is a skill. It doesn't mean that you're going to be a perfect teacher if you check all these boxes, but it means that you're trying. And it moves away from this kind of binary are you a good teacher or are you not.

[00:14:17] The other interesting thing that I heard a lot, is that departments are increasingly seen as the units of change. Several people I spoke to are working on either national projects or across a university, would talk about the importance of getting people within departments or disciplines to talk about teaching. This is interesting because they recognize that culture matters. It goes back to your larger point about how do you change the culture?

[00:14:44] It can't just be one innovator professor in a department of 20 people trying to do active learning in his chemistry class, right? Because he goes away, or the students go on to another class and it all kind of comes out and doesn't really make much difference in the long run. But if you get 20 chemistry professors together to say, what do we want people to know in chem 101? How do we know that they're learning? How can we make sure that they stay engaged? How do we create authentic assessments that really spark people's curiosity and interest and engagement with each other? I heard that from a number of faculty members in departments that are doing exactly that, and that's also a safe space in which professors can talk to each other about. Hey, you know, I'm really having this problem in this X class. Can you help me with it? And they're talking to their peers who understand exactly what's happening in that class because they've been through it themselves. So I think that's really interesting.

[00:15:39] I also think another interesting element here are data and analytics. And by that, I mean sometimes when people can see the big pictures through data, that's the push they need to change. In my story, I write about David Laude. He's a chemistry professor at UT Austin who taught in a very traditional manner for years. And he's been written about in the New York times, he's given Ted talks on this subject, he's completely an evangelist for rethinking your teaching.

[00:16:04] And so what he says is that he used to see students' success or failure as kind of their own responsibility. His job was to read out those students who did not belong in his class. It wasn't until he moved into an administrative position, and he looked at exactly who was failing, or who was struggling in his class, and it tended to be students who were first gen, or who were came from lower income families or lower income communities. And then the light bulb went on. He realized his teaching was the problem, that he was not reaching all his students. And he radically rethought his courses through the university itself. He helped others rethink these introductory gateway courses, and he's really helped UT Austin improve its retention and graduation rates through some of his work.

[00:16:47] You had also asked me about what surprised me. This is something I get re-surprised about with, with every story I do - it's how siloed higher education is. I'm always amazed how little people know about each other's work. Sometimes it's across campuses, which is more understandable, but sometimes it's within an institution. And I feel like not a lot of people are connecting the dots between what happens in the classroom and how students are doing overall.

[00:17:14] You know, I mentioned Jonathan Zimmerman's book, *Amateur Hour*, and he noted that an irony that is, colleges are becoming more bureaucratic. Classrooms are often the last place touched by bureaucracy. A lot of that has to do with academic freedom issues, but if you're looking

at student success and you want to figure out how students are fairing in college, you do have to look at the classroom experience.

[00:17:37] **Catherine Ross:** I couldn't agree more with you, and I actually thought that the David loudest story was very interesting because I remember back in the 90s and early 2000s, Uri Treisman, who's a calculus professor at UT Austin, was doing the same thing in calculus. And he published and he spoke at conferences and I thought, huh. I wonder if David knew about Uri Treisman's work in calculus. He was spurred by the same observation, not as an administrator, but simply as an instructor, he realized that it was the same groups of students who were consistently not succeeding in his calculus classes. And he started looking at how to change how they engaged with calculus, both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

[00:18:35] And I just, it made me curious, is this an example of how siloed higher ed is that this innovation happened at least a decade before David came on the scene and had his epiphany. Because disciplines don't talk to each other, so people don't know, and these kinds of epiphanys happen in a kind of isolated way if it's only within one kind of class or one discipline, which I know that what you said is exactly right, and there is more enthusiasm now at the departmental level for change. And I think that's great, but I also think at some level there has to be a kind of way to share what's happening so that biology isn't reinventing the wheel from what chemistry has already done and tried.

[00:19:27] **Beth McMurtrie:** Right. I totally agree with you, and I hear that a lot too, that people don't talk across disciplines, and it's a real challenge. I mean, I don't, I can't speak to UTS specifically, but it would not surprise me at all that physics and chemistry and math, you know, they each have their own ways of approaching teaching and, and sort of look within their discipline to understand better teaching practices rather than across disciplines.

[00:19:50] **Catherine Ross:** Well, it's certainly a complicated, complex situation, but I do think, as you noted, that there is maybe a little bit more willingness now for schools, writ large, and for departments to think more carefully about the data, the analytics. That, what's, what are they seeing when they look at what's happening with students in their classrooms. So I'm hopeful that maybe that will keep some of these change efforts moving forward.

[00:20:22] **Beth McMurtrie:** Yes. And that's something I talk a bit about in this story. I mean, not only did the pandemic spur new conversations around what is effective teaching, but it also opened people's eyes to the fact that, that students have lives outside of the classroom and comes from very different circumstances.

[00:20:39] And so, another driver I think for change, is this issue of equity. If you want all of your students to succeed, you really need to think about being the most effective teacher that you can. We know that traditional teaching practices tend to benefit students who know how to quote on quote, do college. You know, they went to good high schools, they had lots of support, they had parents who went to college. And the students who tend to struggle, and we see this most often say in gateway courses, those make or break courses for students as they move into the major, we see higher DFW rates, and we often see that it's the less privileged students who are more likely to struggle.

[00:21:15] And that's where actually a lot of the interesting work is taking place in some of these gateway courses as they rethink those and try to move to more active learning, more peer learning, group learning, lower stakes assessment to kind of level the playing field.

[00:21:29] **Catherine Ross:** Yes, those classes, I think, are critical for any university because it is where students find out if they can pursue the major they thought they were going to pursue, or if they feel like they're being pushed out.

[00:21:45] **Beth McMurtrie:** Right. And the professor might not even realize that that's the message, or signal, they're sending.

[00:21:50] **Catherine Ross:** Right. Exactly, as some of the people that you wrote about in your article said in their own epiphany's.

[00:21:58] **Beth McMurtrie:** Yeah.

[00:21:59] **Catherine Ross:** Well thinking about the future of these kinds of changes, there was one quote that I really love from one of the people you interviewed, Ginger Clark, who's the Associate Vice Provost for Academic and Faculty Affairs at the University of Southern California. She said, and I quote, "I don't think in 10 years there will be many universities left that haven't changed the way they think about teaching. Change the way they evaluate it and reward it," she says, adding that "higher education ignores the research about pedagogy at its peril. If we want to live our values and create a more diverse, educated citizenry, then we need to recognize that asking students to fit themselves into our model, as opposed to adjusting our model to fit students, is not going to work."

[00:22:50] I think that's a very optimistic view. I would love to believe it. I'm just curious. Are you as optimistic as she is about the future of teaching in higher ed? And what do you think it's going to look like in 10 years?

[00:23:04] **Beth McMurtrie:** Uh, I'm a bit of a skeptic by nature. I think most journalists are, but I do think that it's almost inevitable that colleges will need to examine their teaching more carefully in the years to come as Clark noted, there are a lot of external forces pushing for that.

[00:23:19] You know, when we as a society talk about valuing diversity and fostering equity and inclusion, then you just have to look at what's taking place in the classroom. And if you can see that your students of color, your first gen students, your Pell eligible students are struggling at higher rates, then the next step is to ask, why? And maybe some of those answers lead back to how a course is taught, so that's one thing.

[00:23:40] But also many people told me that younger faculty members coming into teaching are fully aware of these challenges from the start, and so they're eager to, to experiment and try new things. That is not to say that mid-career or late career professors don't care or aren't interested, I just think it's maybe more in the water as younger faculty members are coming into teaching.

[00:23:59] And we also know that there's a lot of conversation and has been for awhile in STEM around effective teaching and moving towards active learning. The question is, will they have the will and the ability to do so? And that's where my skepticism kicks in, because I think there's just a lot of competing pressures for time and for resources. I mean, research intensive universities

especially. They're under enormous pressure to pursue grants and do cutting edge research and that is very real pressure that faculty members face that would limit their time that they can devote to professional development around teaching.

[00:24:31] And then, frankly, a lot of colleges are dealing with shrinking budgets, and if a good chunk of your faculty members are adjunct faculty, I really questioned how you are going to get those folks professional develop in a meaningful way that's not going to cost you time and money. Will your typical regional public college or large state university have the resources to devote to, say, training or course release?

[00:24:56] I don't know. The trend lines are traveling in that direction. So, in short, I can't predict where things will be in 10 years, other than to say that I think there will definitely be a much more heightened awareness around the link between effective teaching and student success.

[00:25:10] **Catherine Ross:** I really hope so, because the whole issues of equity in the learning environment, really, I think have been brought to the fore, particularly in the pandemic. So, I feel like people really can't turn their back on that now. And making that connection between the things you do in your classroom are part of that equity picture. So, I'll stay optimistic to your, to your skepticism.

[00:25:40] **Beth McMurtrie:** Okay!

[00:25:42] **Catherine Ross:** Which kind of leads me to the last question, which is, what keeps you inspired and motivates you to believe in the possibility of change in higher education?

[00:25:52] **Beth McMurtrie:** That's an interesting question. I mean, I've been a higher education reporter for over 20 years and, as I mentioned, I've been writing about teaching specifically for about five of those years. I really do find higher education endlessly fascinating because it reflects and embodies so much of what's happening in the world around us.

[00:26:08] I mean, it's an engine of economic growth, but it also exacerbates economic divides. It's a force for social change, but it's also a place where cultural and political battles get fought. And we're seeing a lot of shifts in how people think about the role of college, the role of the professor, the role of the student.

[00:26:28] Colleges can no longer just say, "trust us" when it comes to educating students. They have to explain what they do and they have to show their value. And I think all of those forces, when it comes to teaching, we're going to see those things play out in and around the classroom.

[00:26:43] And I think most faculty members are really trying their best to navigate these waters. I mean, I talk to faculty members all the time about their teaching and they really do, when they have time, want to become effective teachers. They care about their students' wellbeing and they care about their students' academic success. So, I enjoy writing about their experiences. I enjoy reflecting on what they've told me and describing students' experiences too and then drawing connections among all these things and sharing ideas where I can.

[00:27:11] **Catherine Ross:** Well, it's extraordinarily helpful. It's helpful, I think, both to those who teach, but also to those of us who try to support teaching and convince people that these changes are necessary. So, we're very grateful for the work that you do in your writing and exploring.

[00:27:32] **Beth McMurtrie:** Thank you very much. And thanks for the opportunity to talk about some of this reporting. I've heard from a lot of faculty members, it does reflect their lived experience, and that's always a good sign as a journalist, that you're kind of on the right track.

[00:27:45] **Catherine Ross:** Well, that's great to hear, and I'm sure it's helpful for them to see their experience reflected back for the public and to see it accurately depicted. So it's a huge service, I think that you provide for us. You're holding up the mirror.

[00:28:04] **Beth McMurtrie:** Right. And one of the things I might hear from a professor or a department chair, and they might say, I'm going to take this article to my dean. And again, one of the challenges is people have so many competing pressures in their day, right? They can't always focus in on this particular problem, or that particular problem. So if you can kind of articulate something and say, here, here's what the challenge is, and here's what we're going through, and here's what needs to be done, although the what needs to be done part is always the most complex, I think that can be helpful for a lot of people as well.

[00:28:33] **Catherine Ross:** Yes, indeed. I have shared your article with a few faculty members and a couple of departments. So, definitely very helpful to have that all in one place like that.

[00:28:45] Well, thank you, again, for taking time to talk with us and sharing your work and your deep thinking and helping higher ed to move to a better place. And also for being part of the spring 2022 podcast season!

[00:29:01] **Beth McMurtrie:** Thanks so much, Catherine. Thanks for having me on your podcast. I really appreciate it.

[00:29:07] **Catherine Ross:** If you've enjoyed this podcast, please visit our website where you can find any resources mentioned in the episode, ctl.columbia.edu/podcast. Please like us, rate us, and review us on Apple Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts.

[00:29:25] Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning is a product of Columbia University's Center for Teaching and Learning and is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, Abie Sidel and Jon Hanford, production support from Kate Tigh-Pigott. Our theme music is *In The Lab* by Immersive Music.